

The Lion

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Saint Mark's Parish, Denver, Colorado*

Founded 1875

REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY is observed throughout the English speaking world among those whose families served in the Great War of 1914-1918. The observance falls on the Sunday close to 11 November, the Day of the Armistice at which at 11 o'clock on the 11th Day of the 11th Month the guns went silent over Europe. Veterans of the Second World War and subsequent Service are also remembered with thanksgiving. At St. Mark's the lists of veterans commemorated are extensive. Six men from this Parish died during their deployment in 1917 and 1918. That has to be remarkable for a parish church so far from Flanders fields.

My maternal grandfather was hauled from a bad patch with some German machine guns on the Western Front in an ambulance with five other wounded of the American Expeditionary Force (the youth above him in the racks bled to death over him). William B. Burkett was patched up by a skilled surgeon in a Field Hospital. He returned to New York City for eight months of recovery by good nursing care. He was 23 years old. Fifty six years later his grandson was offered a scholarship as a student chaplain to St. Luke's Hospital, Morningside Heights, 113th and Amsterdam Avenue, New York City, and assigned to that open Ward, along with the floors Stuyvesant Eight (Hospice) and Plantagenet Four (High Society). At the age of 25 years I served there for eight months. Some would say these events are entirely coincidental and not the work of Divine Providence. Or, maybe we owe something of ourselves back to those who have been so good to us? And maybe that is why we always observe the Remembrance Sunday. Thanks to Father Deacon Vladimir and all who serve in the Colour Guard, to the choir and soloists, Mr. Lickteig who reads the memorial lists, and all who serve faithfully for this Observance. Remembrance Sunday is a tradition that belongs to what remains of Christian Civilisation. -Fr. John



IN Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly

Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

I vow to thee, my country, all earthly things above,
Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my
love;
The love that asks no question, the love that stands
the test,
That lays upon the altar the dearest and the best;
The love that never falters, the love that pays the
price,
The love that makes undaunted the final sacrifice.

I heard my country calling, away across the sea,
Across the waste of waters she calls and calls to me.
Her sword is girded at her side, her helmet on her
head,
And round her feet are lying the dying and the dead.
I hear the noise of battle, the thunder of her guns,
I haste to thee my mother, a son among thy sons.

And there's another country, I've heard of long ago,
Most dear to them that love her, most great to them
that know;
We may not count her armies, we may not see her
King;
Her fortress is a faithful heart, her pride is suffering;
And soul by soul and silently her shining bounds
increase,
And her ways are ways of gentleness, and all her
paths are peace. §

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Jason Zacharias Falcone is a Subdeacon serving at the Altar of St. Mark's, Denver. He recently returned from four years of Service, most of that time deployed to Iraq with the U. S. Army, and with the rank of Captain. Jason first visited St. Mark's about eight years ago shortly after he got his driver's permit at age 16. He and his parents, the Rev'd Dr. John Falcone and Diana were received into the Orthodox Church at St. Mark's. Jason has completed the House of Studies course, obtained a Master's Degree from the St. John Damascene School of Theology at Balamand and has now matriculated at Holy Cross School of Theology in Brookline, MA. His parochial internship is at St. George's Church where the Rev'd Joseph Kimmett is Rector. The following is a paper submitted towards his course of study for an M. Div. degree. The narrative seems to be mostly a work of science fiction and yet based on years of good will and formed by the virtue of hope. -Fr. John

The Mission Minded Parish

Subdeacon Jason Falcone

IN THIS PAPER, I will present an examination of St. Mark's Orthodox Church (Denver, Colorado), in light of material presented in class. I will begin with a brief historical overview, which I will follow with an in-depth look at the life of the parish. This examination will be based on five areas: *worship, education, community, service, and outreach*. My analysis is based on phone correspondences with the pastor at St. Mark's and his assistants, and it is supplemented with my personal experiences in the parish. The methodology at St. Mark's church is in some ways different than the material presented in class but in others the same. St. Mark's methodology focuses on spiritual vitality, which is in agreement with George Barna's statement in his book *User Friendly Churches* that "the tactics required to develop strong spiritual character...are very different from the tactics required to generate numerical growth."¹ The 'tactics' used by St. Mark's are not a quick fix yielding an exponential growth in the number of congregants. They are, however, tactics which have enabled St. Mark's parish to grow, remain spiritual vibrant for many years, and make a very strong contribution to Orthodox outreach.

Historical Overview

St. Mark's was founded originally in 1875 as an Episcopal parish. They obtained their first permanent

¹ Barna, George *User Friendly Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), 21.

church structure in 1879. In 1889, they moved into a larger building, which still stands (this beautiful grey stone building in Denver's urban center remained in the hands of the Episcopal church when St. Mark's later converted to Orthodoxy. It was later sold and now functions as a nightclub known as 'The Church').

During her time as an Episcopal parish, St. Mark's was blessed with a personal visit from then Archbishop, now Saint, Tikhon on the Feast of St. Mark in the year 1904. St. Tikhon's preaching in Greek was translated by the pastor of a local Orthodox parish, Holy Transfiguration (now OCA) which had just entered canonical Orthodoxy from Uniatism. Today, a large icon of St. Tikhon hangs on the inside of the church over the door from the nave to the narthex.

In the mid 1980s, St. Mark's realized that they no longer wanted to be a part of the Episcopal church. In 1991, the pastor of St. Mark's, Father John Connely, was ordained as an Orthodox priest in the Antiochian Archdiocese. He then chrismated 96 of his parishioners into Orthodoxy the first Sunday after his Orthodox ordination. Those who entered Orthodoxy with the pastor found a new church building nearby, located on Vine Street in the Washington Park neighborhood of Denver. The new building remains the parish's home to this day.²

Examination

Worship. The liturgical usage of St. Mark's follows the 'Western Rite.' It is an Orthodox modification of western liturgical customs in order to follow the usage of the ancient western Church. The idea to integrate western liturgical customs with Orthodox tradition was largely led by St. Tikhon himself. He sent a copy of the 1892 American Edition of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer to the Holy Synod of Moscow for review. After appropriate changes, the Holy Synod granted approval for the usage of the Book of Common Prayer.³ Among the changes currently incorporated, the Western Rite utilizes a descending epiclesis at the consecration of the Gifts, as well as the subtraction of the *filioque* from the Creed. The use of western liturgical customs in Orthodox missions can trace its history to Ss. Cyril and Methodius, Enlighteners of the Slavs, who also utilized western liturgical customs in their missionary endeavors in addition to eastern ones.⁴

² <<http://www.westernorthodox.com/stmark/about>>

³ <<http://www.westernorthodox.com/western-rite>> As a result, the ROCOR has a number of Western Rite parishes.

⁴ Connely, John *Lux Occidentalis* <<http://www>>

The use of customs which are both acknowledged by the hierarchy as fully Orthodox and also familiar to many converts is a key part of St. Mark's missionary methodology. For example, prior to the Nativity liturgy, the parish holds a Christmas Carol service.

In addition to the type of liturgy at St. Mark's, the frequency of worship is another important part of the parish's methodology. In addition to Sunday services, the parish has a history of holding regular weekday Liturgies and Matins/Vespers services. This, according to the pastor, attracts the Holy Spirit.

The aspect of the parish's worship which the pastor emphasized most to me is that he specifically utilizes the men in the parish to assist him in the various aspects of the worship services. While the choir is open to both men and women, all reading and altar service is performed by men, who range in age from boys in elementary school to men in their sixties. These men are generally first employed in basic altar service, and then in reading the Scriptures. The pastor, as well as the bishop, places a strong emphasis on tonsuring/ordaining those who serve to the appropriate order – boys or young men are tonsured as 'taper bearers,' and when they are older made readers or subdeacons. The pastor pointed out to me that the prayer at the elevation of a man to be a Reader says that it is the "first degree of the priesthood," and that the man is henceforth charged to "peruse the divine Scriptures daily."⁵ Thus the man is pushed to take initiative in the study of Scripture and to take his role of leadership seriously. The pastor emphasized to me that this organization of the liturgical worship pushes men to assume spiritual leadership roles both in their families and in the Church, which, in turn, inspires the women to pursue their spiritual callings as well. However, the pastor emphasized to me that it must begin with the men.

The combined emphasis on frequent liturgical worship with pushing men to take leadership in it produces vocations to major orders as well as the monastic life. The pastor at St. Mark's has presented six priests for ordination, as well as three deacons, over ten subdeacons, and countless readers. Also the parish has directly produced one monk and one nun. Both of these people, whom I have had the privilege of knowing personally, were formed in their spiritual life directly by the frequent liturgical services in the parish, as well as the pastor's deep personal involvement in their lives. The pastor's method resembles the method of Christ himself, who focused on a group of seventy, and a core group of twelve. The parish's worship is extremely

traditional; the congregation of St. Mark's derives its commitment and excitement about the worship from the fact that it is so traditional. This delight in the traditional nature of liturgical practice directly contradicts Stephen Macchia's principle in his book *Becoming a Healthy Church*, where he states that vibrant parishes utilize contemporary worship styles.⁶ The key issue, however, is that the pastor of St. Mark's parish does, in fact, value worship which is *vibrant*. It is additionally worship that emphasizes *substance*. The pastor at St. Mark's shares his passion for this type of traditional worship with the congregation, and obtains their commitment to and involvement in conducting traditional liturgical services. The people's involvement is further bolstered by the encouragement of congregational singing; all of the music for the services is made available for the people to sing aloud, either in hymnals or in the bulletin. The parish's commitment to worship is driven by the personal commitment thereto of the pastor. George Barna says that the successful parishes which he studied all had leaders whose enthusiasm was transferred to the people.⁷ This has certainly been a key element in the life of St. Mark's parish. The enthusiasm of the pastor for worship, as well as of the assistant priest and deacons, has had a fundamental influence on the development of the church.

Interestingly, the pastor's organization of the liturgical life of St. Mark's parish is very similar to the organization of Coptic parishes. In Coptic parishes, men are encouraged to enter singers, readers, and epideacons (subdeacons); each of these is considered a degree of the diaconate. With each order given specific duties and rules of life. The liturgical functions of each rank are taken very seriously,⁸ which encourages their involvement and investment in the public services. This seriousness makes for a precise ordering of the liturgical life of the parish, and undoubtedly contributes to the intense and strict spiritual life and practices present in Coptic parishes.

Community. Regarding this aspect of parish life, the pastor at St. Mark's expressed that worship is central, and that the *family* is central. It is in this context of worship and family that prayers and regular Scripture readings should be done; the parish, in turn, is the "big home" where families join together in worship. In regard to the youth, the parish makes an effort to send the young people to camp in the summer,

6 Macchia, Stephen A *Becoming a Healthy Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 20.
7 Barna, George *User Friendly Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), 32.
8 <http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/thecoptic-church/sacraments/7_priesthood.html>

giving them an opportunity for exposure to interaction with the wider Orthodox community. It provides them with an opportunity to forge meaningful relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ. St. Mark's parish, however, does not have "fellowship" events such as movie nights, cultural events, etc; my understanding is that this is intentional, since the focus is put on worship of the Holy Trinity.

Education. The church maintains a vibrant educational program, and has done so for years. The parish's commitment to education is evidenced by the fact that their weekly adult education is not canceled even on Christmas Day. The adult education is held between the two Liturgies on Sunday, and the children's education groups are held simultaneously (although only the adult class is held during the summer). The children's education is divided into three groups by age. The focus of the adult education program is usually Scriptural study, in addition to general catechetical instruction, etc. Also, a weekly catechism class is taught by the assistant priest and pastor, along with one of the deacons. This catechism class is scheduled in the morning after a Liturgy, which underscores the parish's emphasis on the centrality of worship.

The educational benefit of the parish's programs is not confined to those attending the classes; it extends to the teachers as well. A number of the people in the parish, clergy, and laity, both men and women, are employed to teach various classes. It gives them a strong sense of their involvement in the parish and prompts them to study their subjects with greater dedication.

Additionally, St. Mark's parish built a large retreat center on a beautiful secluded stretch of land in the mountains. The retreat center has been used recently for a retreat focusing on chanting, as well as a women's retreat. Concurrently with the women's retreat, the pastor held a young men's construction project, providing them an opportunity for service, and the pastor an opportunity to provide spiritual mentorship.

St. Mark's parish has a strong custom of spiritual direction taking place both inside and outside of the Sacrament of Penance. The pastor regularly makes himself available to any and all parishioners who have questions regarding life and spirituality. He has a deep investment in the lives of his parishioners. In addition to hearing confessions from parishioners, he is sought out by others outside the parish for spiritual direction on a regular basis. Also, the assistant priest is very active in hearing multiple confessions on Sunday, a ministry to which he is particularly dedicated. The parish's commitment to the preeminent importance of spiritual direction agrees with Barna's assessment that effective

churches focus on people, not programs, since they are the true reason for ministry.⁹

Service. The community service performed by St. Mark's parish is largely handled by the assistant priest. His philosophy is to minister to anyone who crosses his path who is in need. He related to me how he recently went to extreme lengths to help a neighbor who was facing unjust legal issues, even attending court with him and meeting with the District Attorney. Similarly, he also spent a considerable amount of time helping an elderly lady with severe vision problems with whom his wife had come into contact, even bringing her food and driving her to doctor appointments. Approximately a month ago he related to me that he and his khouria were having lunch with a physics professor and his wife. This professor's father was a leading prize winner in physics, and he himself was a quite respected professor at a local (very strongly secular) university. Religiously, he was a seemingly firm Agnostic. At first, I could scarcely understand why an Orthodox priest felt drawn to have lunch with this man. The priest formed a surprising connection with him, however. Several weeks later, the man's wife called the priest to say that her husband was unexpectedly dying, and they requested the priest to come. Although the man was not a member of the parish, Orthodox, or even Christian, the priest spent countless hours with him on his deathbed. Although the professor did not specifically become Orthodox before his death, his request for a priest to be with him in his final earthly moments undoubtedly showed that something had touched the man's heart. The priest, having spent so long with him, expressed that he definitely felt there was hope for the man in eternity. Then, as an even greater surprise, the departed man's wife asked the priest to speak at the memorial service. The service was to be held at the local university, with a large number of science professors in attendance. The priest accepted. At the memorial, various people read letters related to the departed man's life. The priest then rose, and said that he also had a letter to read: St. John's First Epistle. This story shows the parish's commitment to be open to every opportunity that the Lord offers to bring the light of Christ into the darkness, and to each person who is in need of Christ's love.

Outreach. The parish's outreach is largely patterned on the "core group" model. A central group is mentored by the priest, who in turn are eventually sent out for their own ministries, often years later. One of the six priests mentioned previously was sent by the bishop to a declining parish in another state; this priest brought to that parish the vibrant spiritual life he had

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acquired during his time at St. Mark's, and that parish was turned around from its decline. St. Mark's church also sponsored the creation of a nearby mission parish under the leadership of a priest who also came from St. Mark's. The pastor at St. Mark's related to me that part of the price of outreach is losing people who are valuable assets to the parish; rather than keeping them for the good of one's own parish, it is in the best interest of spreading the Kingdom of God to send them where they are called by God and most needed.

Additionally, the pastor runs an Orthodox liturgical publishing press. Notably, he refuses to receive personal financial benefit from it. It furnishes liturgical products to numerous Orthodox parishes, as well as to conservative western Christians, in North America including Canada, various countries in Europe, the Oceanic continent including New Zealand, and, most recently, Asia and South America.

The priest did relate to me, also, that his growth efforts in the parish were hurt by the loss of seven families recently; these all left due to the combination of the economic recession and the high cost of living in the Denver area. Additionally, he indicated that an area for potential improvement was establishing a mechanism for following up with first-time visitors.

The parish's value for supporting the wider Orthodox Church is reflected in their budget. In addition to supporting IOCC and OCMC, the parish sends regularly monthly contributions to five different Orthodox monastic communities.

St. Mark's parish missionary methodology perhaps can be summarized best by citing Rick Warren's reference to an old adage in his book *The Purpose Driven Church*. It says: "The main thing is to keep the main thing as the main thing!"¹⁰ At St. Mark's parish, the 'main thing' is worship and spiritual direction/formation. The intense cycle of liturgical services provides the context: worship of the Holy Trinity. Employing the congregation in the liturgical services, either through congregational singing, choir involvement, or employing the men in reading and altar service, provides for spiritual formation on both a personal and a corporate level. The personal level of spiritual formation is taken further by the direct personal investment of the pastor and assistants in the lives of the people in the parish. This is accomplished through sincere, loving relationships, spiritual counsel, and confession. §

Linus, Pope and Martyr

The Very Rev. Father Lester Michael Bundy
Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies, Regis University
A Sermon for the Russian Orthodox Conference 2011

THE MASS TODAY COMMEMORATES LINUS, Pope and Martyr. St. Linus died circa 79 A.D. According to the Moorhouse Book of Saints, he was the immediate successor of St. Peter to the See of Rome. He governed the Church for about 12 years. By tradition he is venerated as a martyr and mentioned in the first Eucharistic prayer, but there is no evidence of his martyrdom. Eamon Duffy, in his *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, notes that while there is little actual historical knowledge about the life of Linus, the fact that he was so profoundly venerated is evidence of the significance of his life and legend.

So, big deal. In the modern world in which we live, who really cares about these old dead guys like Linus? What, if anything do they have to do with us today? Those questions, put in those same terms were asked of me on several occasions during my 35 years of teaching in a Jesuit university. My students would often ask me why do we have to learn about these old people. Now, one might think that students in a Catholic school would have some sensibility to the veneration of the saints. Some sense of their historic faith. Not so! Of course there were the few occasional "bright lights." Students that were the exception. But not many. It appears that in their rush to "modernize" and "protestantize," the Roman Church in America has abandoned the cult of the saints -- along with a number of other historic practices. And of course the protestants in America haven't a clue.

Veneration of the Saints and Relics is and always has been a vital part of the ancient Christian faith. Yet, with a few notable exceptions, it seems that we Orthodox are the only ones in America still practicing the historic catholic faith. I recall a few years ago when his Grace Bishop BASIL was speaking to a group of us Western Rite priests in Denver. He said "you men are the only ones who are keeping this ancient and valuable faith alive [he was talking specifically about the Western Rite]. He enjoined us to be faithful to the tradition and true to its historic roots. As Western Rite clergy and laity we have a special concern -- for

10 Warren, Rick *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 89.

it seems that the Western Saints particularly are in danger of being abandoned. One of the great modern saints John Maximovich, Bishop and Wonderworker of Shanghai and San Francisco, was a great advocate of remembering the Western Saints. We owe him much for that as well as many other things.

Why should we care about these old dead people? Because they are our ancestors in the faith. Because they are the perfect example of what we are called to be, as followers of the true historic Apostolic Church. Because they are an inspiration to us as we face some of the same dangers and battles they faced. Because they are still among us. As, in the words of the book of Hebrews "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." Because they are the continuity of the faith stretched out over the years – a continuum of faith lived and experienced uniting us all in one great Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. Because they still labor for us in response to our prayers and supplications.

Anthony Ugolnik, in his book *The Illuminating Icon*, shows how the ancient Russian Orthodox traditions endured even under some of the most virulent Communist oppression. He makes the point that the often damaged and nearly obliterated wall paintings of icons of the saints, in closed churches that had been turned to secular use and even in ruined churches where only segments of the walls remained, were a silent witness to the faith that inspired and enlivened Russian Christians. In modern times, especially in our increasingly secularized society, the saints still serve to aid, comfort and sometimes protect us in the face of evil.

At my parish St. Columba, we are blessed to have four primary relicts and three secondary relicts. Those relicts bring those saints even closer to us than if we merely had their icons. They are as much members of our church family as any of us on the parish role. The saints provide a mystic link for every parish with the greater Church, past and present.

Why should we care about these old dead guys? Because it is not just a bunch of "old dead guys." We venerate the women saints as well as the male saints and we recognize that the making of saints is a modern phenomenon today and not only a thing of the past. We live in a world of heroic men and women who are

in the process of moving into sainthood. Within the 20th century there have been arguably more saints produced than in any period of history. We need only to look at the many neo-martyrs of the communist reign of terror. Starting with the special figure of St. Tikhon himself, including the martyred Royal Family, and countless more. And not to overlook the persecution of the Church under the Nazis and such heroic figures as St. Goradze of Prague. Although she is a controversial figure and not a canonized saint, Mother Maria of Ravensbruck is another heroic figure and martyr maintaining a Christian witness in the face of Nazi evil. We could go on and on with this. Martyred saints in Asia and Africa and so on. And now, as we see the developments in the Middle East and the rise of militant Islam it is clear that the future is no brighter for us the 21st century than it was for the 20th. It is entirely possible that we may be looking at even worse times to come.

Why should we care about these old dead people? Because we need them. We need their inspiration. We need their historic continuity. We need what they can teach us about living in a sometimes-evil world. We need their prayers and intercessions. And because we will probably need them even more in the future. §

Christmass Masses at St. Mark's this year
begin with the Vigil Mass on 24 December
SATURDAY EVENING at:

5:00 PM with Choir and Sacred Ministers in
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Lessons and Carols at 10:00 PM

10:30 PM the Solemn Mass in the Night

SUNDAY, CHRISTMAS DAY:

8:00 o'clock the Aurora Mass of daybreak

10:00 o'clock the Mass of Christmas Day

Is *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*¹ true for Christians?

An essay by a Monk of the Western Church

THERE IS A COMMON PHRASE making the rounds now, especially with young unchurched adults, often expressed any time a discussion arises about God, church, worship, or the like: "I'm not religious, but I *am* spiritual." The meaning, of course, is that the person feels they have as much of a spiritual life as they need, and it does not in any way depend on going to church. The first sentence is usually followed by "A church is just a building, and I don't believe that a ritual gets you closer to God. When I want to get closer, I go hiking in the mountains."

My response to those comments, which always draws a puzzled look, is "So, if you were a genius, why would you need to learn to read or write? You have all the faculties you need to show your brilliance, right? It would be a matter of just opening your mouth and talking..." I then go on to explain how "spirituality" is useless without a forum to practice and express it, just as a genius who can't read or write would have no way to exercise his/her gift. Or, what if you had to move to South America or equatorial Africa for work (or any other place that doesn't use English as the language of business), and made no effort to learn the language of your new home? How effective do you think you would be?

I maintain that the prevalent belief of both the unchurched and many Protestant denominations that a sacramental life is unnecessary for our growth as spiritual beings (or even a "close personal relationship with Jesus" or *sola fide*) is a dangerous position for those who consider themselves Christians, and that for us – in answer to the question above – the possibility of salvation outside of the Church could be a dicey proposition. But it is not for us to judge, but only to hope...

In light of this, over the past 18 months it has become clear that our liturgical life is a preparation, an actual dress rehearsal, if you will, for our life of blessedness after death.

I was in California on business over Ash Wednesday last year, and found an Antiochian Eastern Rite church nearby that was having a Mass that evening. I attended and had the following experience (how I described it to the priest there and to Fr. John):

Just prior to Fr. Stephen bringing out the Host for

*Communion, something changed in my perception of that space around and of the altar, and I suddenly **knew** that the liturgy I was witnessing was a 'precursor' or prototype of what would be involved in a life of blessedness following our repose, should God so will it. In other words, liturgy and communion here are a preparation (a rehearsal?) for our next life there, because that will be what those who have found salvation in Christ will do then. Needless to say, that puts the need for regular participation in Mass in a whole new light; indeed, it was sobering.*

*My eyes saw and my heart heard that the liturgy here in this little church in California was, in truth and in reality, a prefiguring of our life after death; that if we 'practice' daily or weekly the ritual and the prayer **here**, we will know how to be **there**, as life in Christ is all liturgy.*

Then back home at St. Mark's, around Labor Day weekend this year, something similar happened:

Waiting in line to receive communion, I noticed that after having just received communion, a father was cradling and quietly talking to one of his young sons in a strikingly tender and loving way, almost like a living Pieta. He left the rail and as the group in front of me filed up, the light around the altar changed, brighter perhaps, and I suddenly was aware that I was watching the "blessed" receiving the Body and Blood of Christ in Heaven. What struck me the most was that I had to force myself to remember that what I was seeing was here on earth, not in Heaven. Had I been alone, I would have wept, especially after seeing our beautiful Resurrection icon in the baptistery, being reminded that by His death and resurrection, Heaven was opened to us. (I should add that neither experience in any way suggested to me that I was witnessing my future; my own salvation is still to be hoped for, but definitely not assured).

In my doubts, Frs. Stephen and John were reassuring, adding:

"Read John 6 and pay particular attention to the last half of the chapter as Christ gives a discourse on heavenly bread. Contemplate your experience and thoughts in view of that theme and remember the dual nature of Christ our God. He is God who became man without relinquishing His divinity. Thereby any act He does as a man is an eternal act as God. God is outside of time, or time is within God. So as we become one with Christ, the sacraments themselves become an experience outside of time/eternal while at the same moment being in time. The liturgy is not only a preparation for heavenly worship; it is Heavenly worship itself while still being in time.

'The divine liturgy is truly a heavenly service on earth, in which God Himself is present and dwells with men: He is both the offerer and the offering. There is on earth nothing higher, greater, (or) more holy than the liturgy.' - Fr John of Kronstadt."

Thankfully, we have many references in Scripture that address this: "You (Christ) are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Heb 7:17 and 21), forcing us to admit that if eternity was not concerned with liturgical worship, Christ would not have a priestly role; and "We have such a High Priest (Christ), who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty (God the Father) in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary... For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest (like those) who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things... But now He (Christ) has obtained a more excellent ministry, in as much as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises..." (Heb 8:1, 5 and 6). Both reinforce an implicit promise that what transpires here in our Mass prefigures the life and worship that will be experienced in Heaven.

Elsewhere, I believe James was saying the same thing: that a "spiritual" life (faith) without works (the liturgy) was dead: "...and receive with meekness the implanted word (Body and Blood of Christ), which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves... he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it (i.e., maintains a sacramental life) and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does." (Jam 1:21, 22, and 25) and "...What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead... and by works faith (is) made perfect? You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only." (Jam 2:14, 20 - 24). This is my own reading of the text, as most commentators discuss the term "work(s)" in terms of what we call "social action" (based on Jam 2:15,16), but I believe it goes beyond that, especially in light of what he discussed in his first chapter.

To recap then, as Christians it behooves us to be always and totally present for the sacramental life here because it is a gift and an opportunity to prepare ourselves for our ultimate destiny, that of a life in eternity and worship with Christ.

¹"There is no salvation outside of the Church." - St. Cyprian



Remembrance Sunday 2011



St. Nicholas' Day 2011

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